

Lawmakers, Governor Trade Blame for Death of Water Bond

By Greg Lucas

Chronicle Sacramento Bureau

Sacramento

A deal on a \$1.7 billion bond that prohibited any of its funds being spent on a Peripheral Canal and that encouraged greater water conservation in Southern California was killed yesterday by Governor Pete Wilson.

The GOP governor claimed that Democratic lawmakers — and their “slavish kowtowing” to “extreme environmental interests” — were responsible for the death of the bond.

But negotiators on the bond say it was Wilson who killed the compromise on behalf of farmers, who demanded more than \$150 million to study the construction of reservoirs opposed by environmentalists.

“It’s over. It’s gone,” Sean Walsh, Wilson’s press secretary said late Thursday night. “A small minority of Luddite environmentalists in the Bay Area refused to look at the broader issues.”

Yesterday, Wilson blamed the bond’s death on Senate President Pro Tem John Burton, D-San Francisco, who sided with environmentalists on the reservoir issue.

“He’s lying,” replied Burton. “He killed the bond himself. He’s the one who shut it down.”

The Senate tried to pass the bond over Wilson’s objections late Thursday, but it fell nine votes short of the 27 votes needed for passage in the 40-member house.

Wilson’s action ended 18 months of sometimes contentious negotiations between water districts, urban users, farmers and environmentalists over what projects the bond should pay for.

The bond also would have avoided a replay of one of the state’s most emotional water fights — the Peripheral Canal, or “isolated facility,” as it is now called by state and federal water planners.

Northern Californians worry that a canal, which would divert water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, would make it easier for Southern California and agricultural interests to obtain more water.

Environmentalists also oppose the canal, fearing it will devastate the bay-delta ecosystem.

The bond required that no money be used for construction or planning of such a canal.

Also contained in the bond was money for underground water storage, levee repair, flood control projects and \$300 million for bay-delta improvements, including fish screens on the massive pumps that push water southward.

Minutes after the bond deal unraveled, three powerful Southern California water agencies that had sought state money to ink a landmark water-sharing deal quickly

hijacked a new measure to secure the \$235 million in taxpayer funds they want. An existing water-related bill was rewritten to include the measure.

The bond contained \$235 million to line two major Southern California aqueducts with concrete and to create underground storage facilities for water taken from the Colorado River.

The money was the key to a his-

toric deal in which the Imperial Irrigation District, which receives the lion’s share of California’s draw from the Colorado River, will sell 200,000 acre-feet to San Diego.

An acre-foot is roughly 328,000 gallons of water — about the amount that two households use in a year.

Backers say the water transfer will reduce Southern California’s thirst for Northern California wa-

ter.

But the deal was nearly scuttled by the massive Metropolitan Water District, whose service area contains 16 million Southern Californians, including San Diegans.

The Met owns the aqueduct that would deliver San Diego’s new water from the Imperial Valley. The Met wanted to keep its monopoly on San Diego’s water supply and demanded a fee for use of

the aqueduct, which would make it uneconomical to buy the Imperial water.

The fee sought by the Met was, coincidentally, \$235 million.

Wilson supports using taxpayer money to pay off the Met, but the fate of the new measure is uncertain in the face of opposition by some Northern California lawmakers who question the deal’s value to the north.